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ABSTRACT

This companion document describing the role of parents, family members, and close friends in the individualized education program (IEP) process; five other companion documents; and an inservice guide comprise a series developed for assisting disabled persons in their transition from school to work. Its purpose is to help family and friends understand the importance of their contribution and support as well as assist them to understand the balance that must be maintained between support and independency. Information is provided on societal attitudes toward family and friend participation in educational development of handicapped students and legislative support for parental involvement. The IEP is described in terms of rule requirements, family questions regarding the IEP documents, and the due process hearing and roles for parents at an IEP conference. Suggestions are made for teaming up with others to provide input to school systems. Information on accessing vocational education and aiding the student in getting employment is presented in a descriptive format. A bibliography concludes the document. (YLB)

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Research and Development Series No. 257D

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EXTENDING HORIZONS: FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Lorella A. McKinney
Catherine West

A document in the series

EXTENDING HORIZONS:

A RESOURCE FOR ASSISTING HANDICAPPED YOUTH IN THEIR TRANSITION FROM VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND 1
What Have Been Societal Attitudes? 1
Legislation Supports Parental Involvement 2
What Is the IEP? 2
Rule Requirements 3
Family Questions 3
The Due Process Hearing 5
Team Up with Others 6
Barriers 6
Roles of Advocacy Groups 7
Group Support of Family 7
ACCESSING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION 8
Understand Agency Systems 8
Must Have Agency Collaboration 8
Overcome Stereotypes 9
GETTING EMPLOYMENT 10
Locate Jobs 10
Provide Support Only as Needed 10
Continue Support in Employment 10
Meet the Challenge 10
BIBLIOGRAPHY 11

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Extending Horizons: Family and Friends describes the importance of the IEP process and the integral roles of parents, family members, and close friends in that process for providing support to handicapped individuals as they move from vocational education to work. Family and friends know the handicapped persons very well, so that strengths and weaknesses in performance can be readily understood and described. Parents are required under Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, to participate in the IEP process for handicapped persons, ages 3 through 21. Family and friends, therefore, are recognized as significant contributors in providing supportive services to handicapped persons in their transition from education to work.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The importance of the role of parents, guardians, spouses, close relatives, and good friends in providing support to an individual who is handicapped throughout troublesome experiences has been verified many times. The support needed may be in the form of providing encouragement, love, advising about personal affairs, a sounding board, advocacy, specialized services, and the like.

Equally important, family and friends should be as objective as possible and refrain from contributing to dependency of handicapped persons. The goal must be to support the handicapped person enough to enable that person to be as independent as possible. In that context, this document is written—to help family and friends understand the importance of their contribution and support as well as assist them to understand the balance that must be maintained between support and independency.

What Have Been Societal Attitudes?

The participation of families and friends in the educational planning and development of handicapped youth and young adults was for many years a matter of attendance at occasional PTA meetings, visits to the classroom at a once-a-year open house and signatures on periodic reports of grades. Parents of handicapped students recognized that this level of participation was not enough. Their children were not receiving the educational opportunities that nonhandicapped students were experiencing. When a handicapped student was admitted to a regular school system—an event that should have been routine but that was, in reality, exceptional—the student and the family were made to feel "lucky." The school system was doing them a favor. In many cases psychological evaluations of handicapped students were conducted and decisions were made about their educational placement without consultation with family members. The decisions and actions of many public school personnel were, in effect, forcing handicapped students to be more disadvantaged than necessary by denying them access to educational experiences essential to future independence and employability.

Action by families and friends of handicapped students to change this situation was directed in two areas. On the one hand, advocates spent years of effort on quiet, behind-the-scenes lobbying with legislators to generate support for legislative safeguards of the rights of handicapped youth. On the other hand, aggressive legal action was taken in various parts of the country to force the elimination of institutional discrimination against the handicapped. The combination of these two types of action finally produced positive change with regard to the education of disabled students.

Today, families' roles are still an important aspect of vocational education for handicapped students. Through ongoing communication with educational personnel involved in your son's, daughter's, or spouse's educational planning, you can take part in the process of ensuring that all disabled students receive the educational benefits to which they are entitled. In order to be effective in these efforts, families need to be familiar with the legal safeguards and requirements that affect the education of handicapped students.

Legislation Supports Parental Involvement

In 1971, as a result of a lawsuit, the State of Pennsylvania entered into a consent agreement with the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children. This agreement gave mentally retarded children full access to the educational system of Pennsylvania at public expense, and it was sanctioned by the Eastern Pennsylvania U.S. District Court. This landmark decision is referred to as PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1971.

Shortly thereafter, in 1972, U.S. District Judge Joseph Waddy affirmed the right of all handicapped children to a publicly supported education in a suit filed against the Washington, D.C., Board of Education (Mills v. Board of Education, 1972). Judge Waddy's decision included appropriate alternatives for students unable to attend regular classes or schools and declared that school systems must guarantee to handicapped students all the constitutional protections of due process and equal protection of law guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution.

These two lawsuits provided the impetus for the introduction of legislation in various states and in Congress, resulting in the passage in 1975 of Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act. State-by-state legislation was passed to bring existing state education statutes into compliance with the new federal law. This law requires that handicapped persons ages 3 through 21 be provided with a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting possible. The Vocational Education Act Amendments of 1976 (Public Law 94-482) were passed to strengthen the ability of states to provide vocational education and required that 10 percent of funds for vocational education be spent on handicapped students.

Both Public Law 94-142 and Public Law 94-482 are strengthened by the requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of handicap by any public or private agency or institution receiving federal financial assistance. The legislation requires the opportunity for parental involvement in the educational process and provides a mechanism for ensuring that that opportunity exists. That mechanism is the individualized education program (IEP).

What Is the IEP?

Parent involvement in educational programming for their handicapped children is mandated by Public Law 94-142. Participation in the individualized education program developed for each

student assures you of having input into, access to, and feedback from the educational program and services to be provided to your child.

Rule Requirements

The proposed rules and regulations that accompany the law state that one or both parents should be involved in the writing of the IEP, even if this involvement is through individual or conference telephone calls. The proposed rules and regulations also stipulate the minimum content of the IEP. This includes the following:

- A statement of the student's annual educational goals
- A statement of short-term instructional objectives
- A statement of specific educational services needed by the student, including related services such as transportation, physical therapy, and special media or materials
- A statement about the initiation date and lengths of time for which each service will be provided
- A statement regarding the extent to which the student will participate in programs designed for nonhandicapped students
- A system for evaluating the effectiveness of the IEP

Family Questions

Family members should understand the importance of the IEP document and the process by which it is developed and carried out. Both the written program and the process for its planning and implementation are vital to the educational experiences and preparation for employment of the disabled individual on a continuing basis. The stated short-range objectives and long-range goals of the IEP also serve as a basis for measuring the educational growth and achievements of the students.

The following three questions with their answers have been identified by Mopsik and Agard (1980) in *An Education Handbook for Parents of Handicapped Children* to clarify further the parent and family roles in the IEP process of developing the program and carrying it out.

1. **Is the IEP a legally binding document?**

   No, the IEP document is not a contract for services or for educational growth, nor is it a formal mechanism for monitoring or evaluating teacher competence. School districts and teachers cannot be held liable if a student does not make the progress expected, but the school staff must make every effort to assist the child in achieving the goals specified in the IEP.

   . . . You may . . . want to assure teachers that you want your child challenged and will not blame them if the progress made is less than expected.

> . . . If certain services are not available, the school must state when they will be available and what will be done in the meantime. If you believe that the school is not providing the services stipulated in the IEP, your recourse is a due process hearing. (p. 158)

Family members, especially parents, should ask about the progress of their child or student at regular IEP reviews or in response to written reports. If progress as reported or outlined in the IEP does not measure up to expectations, you should request that the school provide you with the reasons why there is lack of progress. You have the right to request a revision of the IEP to include any services you believe are needed to assist the disabled person to make expected progress.

2. If the IEP is not a legal document, how will it be used?

Unfortunately, some IEP documents are filed away and not used by either parents or the school. However, the IEP document should be used to

- form the basis of review of your child's educational development;
- record the priorities given to the educational goals selected for your child;
- indicate the special education and related services your child is entitled to at public expense;
- coordinate the instructional services provided your child by several teachers, therapists, and other specialists including those in other community agencies such as vocational rehabilitation;
- communicate to all those concerned exactly what your child's educational needs are and what services each person is to perform, when and for how long;
- establish the instructional activities to be performed in the home;
- serve as a basis for developing vocational rehabilitation, vocational education and career education programs for your child; and
- provide evidence of educational progress that can be considered in pupil progress reports (report cards) and in awarding a diploma. (p. 158)

The IEP is most useful to the disabled person, parents, and/or other family and friends to formalize the need for continued support services and further education. It provides a record or documentation of mutually agreed-upon steps for the educational preparation of disabled persons striving for future work or employment. Legally, responsibility for having the IEP in place extends from ages 3 through 21, unless state laws mandate otherwise. IEP team members, such as parents, friends, employers, and disabled individuals served by the IEP, are encouraged to continue the IEP process and program plans after entry into employment.

3. What should I do if I disagree with the IEP document?

> The law specifies that your child must receive a free, appropriate public education. What constitutes appropriate is defined in your child's IEP. . . . It is important that you agree that the goals, objectives, services, and placement are appropriate for your child. (p. 158)

Any disagreement with any aspect of the IEP that you may have should be shared with the school principal or the vocational director and the director of special education. Family members have the following options if disagreements about the IEP cannot be resolved:

- Give approval to specific sections of the IEP documents.
- Give approval for a specific period of time after which an IEP review will be conducted to determine progress or effectiveness of parts in question.
- Give no approval and request a third party evaluation.
- Give no approval and request a due process hearing.

Postponement of approval necessitates the disabled student's remaining in the existing placement; no change of placement may occur until parental approval is provided by an original signature.

The Due Process Hearing

The three major roles for parents at an IEP conference are as follows:

- Provide information.
- Share in the decision-making process.
- Learn about the student's educational program.

Since the IEP is the key to the student's educational program, you will need to be an active participant in its development to assure that your child receives appropriate services, is placed in an appropriate setting, and receives instruction targeted toward the achievement of appropriate objectives.

When the IEP is written, appropriate vocational education services must be included and designed to meet the student's needs and abilities. If the student is excluded from vocational programs or does not receive the type of training needed to become increasingly self-sufficient, you have the right, under law, to a due process hearing before an impartial hearing officer. This formal procedure occurs only after attempts to discuss and resolve the problem with the appropriate school officials have failed.

You can request a due process hearing if you disagree with your child's educational placement or with the educational goals and objectives specified in the IEP. If you feel that the placement is either too restrictive or not restrictive enough, and if you are unable to come to an agreement with school officials on an alternative placement, a due process hearing may be the solution. Similarly, if you do not believe that the educational goals of the IEP are realistic either because they are too demanding of the student or because they do not require enough effort on his or her part, and if school officials are unwilling to modify the goals accordingly, a request for a due process hearing may be necessary.

If your local school district refuses to make a necessary change in your son's or daughter's IEP, the school personnel must inform you of the district's refusal in writing. This written notice must also explain the reasons for refusal and what you can do about it. If you wish to make a

request for a due process hearing, you must request it from the local education agency. The district has 10 days to set a time and place for the hearing and to appoint an impartial hearing officer. Some states allow parents to participate in the selection of a hearing officer, but others do not.

You are permitted to have legal representation at the hearing and to call witnesses, but these things must be done at your own expense. The hearing officer will hear all evidence presented by both parties. He or she is not allowed to discuss the issues with either party prior to the hearing and must consider only the evidence presented at the hearing. Within 45 days of the request for the hearing, the hearing officer must make a final decision and mail a copy of it to each of the hearing participants. This decision is final unless you or the local educational agency appeals it to the state educational agency. In case of an appeal, the state has 30 days to review the appeal and make a decision.

While the hearing process is taking place, the student remains in his or her current educational placement. If the student has not been admitted to public school and the purpose of the hearing is to get him or her admitted, he or she must be admitted until the hearing is completed and a decision has been made.

The existence of these mechanisms does not automatically guarantee that school systems will willingly take steps to ensure that handicapped students receive the full educational benefits to which they are entitled. It does, however, provide a strong legal basis for action by advocacy groups to obtain those benefits for handicapped students.

Team Up With Others

As advocates for the appropriate educational and vocational training of your handicapped relative or friend, you are in the unique position of being able to provide input and suggestions to school systems and direction to their efforts through participation on citizen advisory boards and councils, parent-teacher associations and other groups affecting educational policy and planning. You can contribute by asking questions, making recommendations, participating in the development of the IEP, joining coalitions, and taking other steps to ensure that schools relate academic and vocational learning in ways designed to meet student needs.

Barriers

Major barriers that traditionally have kept handicapped youth from receiving appropriate vocational education services are the following:

- Lack of information on innovative methods for vocational education evaluation and programming for handicapped youth
- Lack of knowledge on the part of parents and advocates of how school systems operate and how to obtain funding for appropriate vocational education programs
- Lack of familiarity with legal requirements for school systems to provide services for handicapped students under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 94-142) and the Vocational Education Act
- Lack of interagency cooperation in programming for handicapped high school students (Project PAVE n.d.)

Roles of Advocacy Groups

Involvement on the part of advocacy groups can take a variety of forms. Their strongest drive and accomplishments have been to promote legislation from the local level through statehouses and Congress. Several organizations have active legislative committees that monitor the progress of bills, organize attempts to lobby on behalf of favorable legislation, produce witnesses during committee hearings, and function as a source of information to their members, legislatures, and representatives of the media. These efforts have been rewarded as repeated laws have been passed at all levels of government that support the rights of handicapped individuals.

These groups have also served other purposes. For example, they have

- organized educational facilities and services when public schools or agencies were unavailable;
- promoted public awareness and support for programs and efforts to assist handicapped individuals;
- supported parents through counseling, guardianship plans, respite care programs and medical services;
- promoted research into causes, treatments, education and other aspects of the individual's life;
- sponsored training for teachers, teacher aids, community leaders, doctors and others who may be involved in the care, education and treatment of handicapped individuals;
- built permanent structures for sheltered workshops, day schools and diagnostic centers; and
- developed programs to prepare the handicapped for such necessary functions as daily care, mobility, recreation, leisure and raising a family (Brolin and Kokaska, 1979, p. 16).

An effective advocacy group can serve as a resource for school officials, boards of education, and legislators in providing resources for accessibility and in reducing the number of "trial-and-error" related mistakes made in implementing new programs.

Group Support of Family

One of the most important functions served by these groups is the provision of psychological support and guidance for relatives and friends in coping with a wide variety of problems related to the life of a handicapped person. Living with a disabled son or daughter, husband or wife, can become, at times, a kind of balancing act. You may alternate between the natural urge to protect the person from disappointment and hurt and the obvious need to encourage him or her to be as independent and self-sufficient as possible. Hitting on just the right combination, without pushing too far in either direction, can be very difficult. School personnel may or may not be sensitive to this problem, but their priorities must, of necessity, be different from yours. Participation in a group setting with other relatives and friends of handicapped youth affords you the opportunity to vent frustration, share information and ideas, and cooperate in the development of strategies for problem solving.

ACCESSING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

For many disabled students, a vocational education high school program or a postsecondary vocational education school program is the key to achievement of independence and economic self-sufficiency as an adult. Vocational training in the field of the student's interest provides the necessary technical knowledge and skills required for employment after completion of the vocational program. Appropriate vocational services should be a part of the student's IEP while he or she is still in high school. While the IEP is not a requirement in postsecondary programs (unless the state has a law providing free public education through age 21 for all), you may find it desirable to work with the student's counselors and instructors to develop a plan similar to the IEP in order to ensure that the student continues to receive appropriate vocational education services and necessary support services.

Understand Agency Systems

In order to assist in the process of obtaining appropriate vocational services for handicapped relatives or friends, you need to develop an understanding of how various agencies interact, overlap and, at times, fail to work together. The three primary systems that work with disabled students preparing for a vocation are special education, vocational education or training, and vocational rehabilitation. Special education and vocational education or training are part of the public educational system, while vocational rehabilitation is provided through a community agency in most states. Coordination and pooling of resources among these groups is the key to provision of the variety of services that may be needed by students with learning, behavior, and/or physical problems. By sharing information, ideas, personnel, and funds, these systems, which often work in isolation from one another, can work together to benefit handicapped students.

Must Have Agency Collaboration

In October 1977, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare issued a memorandum calling for active collaboration among special education, vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation systems. Parents can help push for this kind of collaboration by inviting representatives of these groups to meet with them to set priorities, discuss needs and resources, and smooth out difficulties.

Since special education and vocational education are parts of the same overall educational system, there should be less resistance to their working cooperatively to benefit students. Special education personnel can help vocational education staff to understand the ways in which handicapping conditions affect students' educational needs and to explore ways of meeting those needs. Once a cooperative working relationship has been established, personnel from both areas can share information about particular students and work together to assure the students' continued progress in the vocational program.

Vocational rehabilitation has, in many cases, the resources to provide support services needed by disabled students, but those services are often unavailable through public school systems. Such services may include transportation, physical therapy, vocational evaluation, job placement, and follow-up.

Overcome Stereotypes

In terms of the vocational program itself, handicapped students and their families and friends may encounter stereotyped expectations about the kinds of employment for which the students should be prepared. Such stereotypes are based on the mistaken idea that particular handicapping conditions lend themselves to certain kinds of work, without taking into account the abilities and interests of the individual. When this kind of problem is encountered, you can and should speak up—in IEP conferences or in conferences with the student's teachers or counselors. In order to bring handicapped students into the mainstream of vocational education, the system must provide opportunities for students to discover what they would like to do and what they can do. Only in this way will they acquire the skills necessary to become employable members of the mainstream of society.

GETTING EMPLOYMENT

As the student nears completion of the vocational program, efforts should begin to be directed toward employment. By this time, the student should have a fairly clear idea of the kind of job he or she wants.

Locate Jobs

Students should be encouraged to make use of whatever assistance is available in locating a job. Resources in this area include school placement offices, local employment/job service offices, vocational rehabilitation placement services, and other agencies of this kind. Help-wanted ads in local newspapers should be checked regularly. The student can also go through the Yellow Pages or obtain a listing of local businesses from the Chamber of Commerce and select those employers in his field. He or she should then send to each employer a resume along with a cover letter requesting an interview. An up-to-date, well-organized resume is essential to the process of job hunting.

Provide Support Only as Needed

Family members and friends can be of assistance in the job-search effort in a variety of ways. One can provide transportation if necessary or give direction about how to travel to places as the student seeks employment, assist in composing resumes and cover letters, as well as help the student to obtain lists of local employers. At this point, however, it is important that the student exercise his or her independence as much as possible, and relatives and friends need to guard against being overprotective or domineering in their efforts to help.

Continue Support in Employment

Once the student completes the vocational education program and begins a job, you will need to continue to be supportive and offer assistance as needed. The initial period of employment will be a time of transition as the student accustoms himself or herself to the requirements of the job and to the new surroundings. Having supportive family members and friends available to talk things over with can help to make the difference between success and failure.

Meet the Challenge

Being the parent or spouse of any person is an enormous responsibility. Living with a handicapped person presents an even greater challenge. Not only must you foster the development of the person in a healthy and productive manner, but you must also overcome the obstacles to that development presented by ignorance, discrimination, institutional resistance to change, and misplaced pity. It is a difficult and time-consuming task, but a rewarding one. The end result—a productive, independent adult, able to participate in and enjoy life—is your gift to yourself, to your family, and to your community.

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